



the new transcendence: friedman benda highlights artists from andrea branzi to samuel ROSS

By Kat Barandy



Lovers Bench, Najla El Zein, 2023 | image © designboom

FRIEDMAN BENDA OPENS 'THE NEW TRANSCENDENCE' IN NEW YORK

Tucked beneath New York City's iconic High Line park in Chelsea, [Friedman Benda](#) has unveiled its latest exhibition, *The New Transcendence*. Curated by Glenn Adamson, this marks the final installment of a trilogy which explores the evolving landscape of design. The works on display have been selected from six designers — Ini Archibong, [Andrea Branzi](#), [Stephen Burks](#), Najla El Zein, Courtney M. Leonard, and [Samuel Ross](#) — all of which venture into the concept of the spiritual realm within contemporary design. '*The New Transcendence is not an exhibition about religion in the organized, traditional, or dogmatic sense,*' notes the gallery. '*Rather, it aims to discover how design can serve as a vehicle for personal and societal transcendence.*'

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installation view | image © Timothy Doyon, courtesy Friedman Benda

ANDREA BRANZI

The work of [Andrea Branzi](#) finds its place in [Friedman Benda](#)'s *The New Transcendence*, as the iconic Italian designer had famously explored the concept of spirituality in design. He is honored with the inclusion of three works from his *Roots* series at the entrance of the gallery space. Each chair comprises a composition of hand-painted wood suspended within metal mesh, contrasted with a painted aluminum base. The works have been described by Branzi as 'similar to thought or philosophy.' The [late](#) designer explained: 'They don't have a reason why they're there. They are brought there by streams, the wind.' Thus, the artworks align with the theme of the exhibition as curator Glenn Adamson acknowledges that 'they originate not only from the designer's process, but as a result of some larger force, perhaps ancestral, perhaps cosmic.'

STEPHEN BURKS

Another highlight of [Friedman Benda](#)'s *The New Transcendence* is [Stephen Burks](#)' functional sculpture titled *Ancestors (Guardian)*. Rising six feet in height, the work explores the concept of self-transcendence as the foundation for Black resistance throughout the history of the African-American experience. The intricate patterning was

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developed through the use of artificial intelligence, and was carefully crafted from both Corten steel and ceramic. It takes on a multi-layered form that symbolizes the intersection between the physical and the metaphysical realms, all while allowing for hidden pockets which serve as functional shelving. Thus, Ancestors (Guardian) bridges the past and present, the handmade and automated, and the symbolic and functional.

SAMUEL ROSS

Merging sculpture and furniture, [Samuel Ross](#) showcases 'Optimistic uncertainties solicit integration (Material Articulation),' at The New Transcendence. Crafted from Fior di Pesca marble, a nod to classical sculpture, its low-slung racecar lines and futuristic, animal-like features make it 'suggestively animate,' as described by curator Glenn Adamson. This piece challenges traditional boundaries, fusing classical tradition with contemporary design, inviting viewers to contemplate the integration of form and function. It stands as an example of Samuel Ross's ability to navigate tradition and modernity, sparking reflections on the evolving nature of design in the contemporary spiritual landscape.



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INI ARCHIBONG

Friedman Benda exhibits *Stargazer*, a sculptural chair by [Ini Archibong](#), a Californian designer of Nigerian descent. The piece is defined by its slender wooden form and its reclining posture, a symbol of both West African tradition and self-reflection among the universe. The chair recalls West African 'Birthing Chair,' forcing the user to take on the position of giving birth while forcing the gaze upward toward nothing but the heavens and ancestors above.

NAJLA EL ZEIN

Artist [Najla El Zein](#) hand-sculpts *Lovers Bench* from Ceppo, a unique stone formed from compressed marble fragments. Comprising two slumping, interlocking elements, the piece conveys a sense of impossible softness through its solid, heavy material. The stone used in this piece is especially rare within Ceppo quarries, with fragments measuring about fifty centimeters — larger than the usual average of ten centimeters. Weighing seven thousand pounds, the sculpture is at once imposing and gentle, suggesting an intimate moment of conversation between two seamlessly fitting elements. *Lovers Bench* becomes a symbol of strength and tenderness frozen in time.



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COURTNEY M. LEONARD

Breach: Logbook 24 | Transcendence Study 04 is a wall-mounted sculpture created by ceramic artist [Courtney M. Leonard](#), who draws from the rich heritage of the Shinnecock tribe, a Native American community from Montauk, Long Island. Drawing inspiration from the sustainable fishing methods of the tribe, Leonard employs earthenware coils and traditional ceramic techniques to craft intricate net-like forms. Each piece is mounted against a backdrop of graphic patterning reminiscent of the 1960s mod style. The contrast of the delicate ceramic structures against the bold graphic patterns creates a visual narrative that weaves together elements of tradition, sustainability, and contemporary aesthetics.